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NATO Allies Look to Counter Soviet, Cuban Hand in Africa

Tense U.S.-Moscow Ties Block Headway on SALT

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More than two months ago President Carter decided to make another attempt to break the long deadlock with the Soviet Union on the completion of a strategic arms limitations treaty.

Relations with Moscow were easing slightly in March as the alarm over the Soviet and Cuban buildup in Ethiopia subsided with the end of the Ogaden war. The debate over linkage between SALT and Soviet intervention in Africa was declining. But today another round of SALT talks is ending in New York without the signing of a treaty in sight.

Relations with Moscow are more tense than ever in this administration, alarms are ringing again over Soviet activities in Africa, linkage is being debated anew.

Just as Carter insists that there is no direct linkage because SALT must stand on its own merits, so it is unclear that the failure to make significant progress in this round of SALT talks is directly related to the darkening atmosphere.

The present atmosphere, however, worsens the prospects for any SALT treaties being politically acceptable in the United States, administration officials warned.

A SALT II TREATY requires a political decision from both the United States and the Soviet Union, officials here say, to accept the kind of compromises that have been framed by technical experts. The atmosphere is not conducive to decisions that hint at any softening of U.S. determination to be militarily strong.

The administration is now taking a hard line in public that the biggest decisions have to be made by the Soviets because they must agree to U.S. positions on two key issues, limiting Soviet Backfire bombers and restricting missile modernization.

But other issues still require some modifications in American positions. These are considered by many officials to be possible during arguments over Soviet act

Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance was interrupting his participation in the NATO meeting under way in Washington to go to New York today. His meeting there with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko on SALT followed meetings here last Saturday that contributed much to the souring.

They clashed over the Soviet and Cuban roles in the recent invasion of Zaire's Shaba province.

GROMYKO DENIED any involvement. Vance insisted that the United States had evidence of it. Other U.S. officials like National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski have reiterated the point, and CIA Director Stansfield Turner was scheduled to lay the evidence secretly before the congressional committee today. The clash between Vance and Gromyko overshadowed the SALT purpose of their meetings. They had talked in New York last Thursday and here Saturday before today's final meeting in this round.

Informed sources said neither side brought to the negotiating table substantive new proposals for resolving the outstanding issues. But in both high-level talks like these and in technical discussions in Geneva, both sides claim that they continue to inch closer to a new treaty.

"Neither side is ready yet to bite the bullet" of decisions needed to close the final gap, one insider commented.

As a result, completion of a SALT treaty goes on receding into the future, as it has done in the 3½ years since an imprecise outline for it was agreed upon at Vladivostok.

Some informed sources now expect the administration to face the decisions in late summer or early autumn, before the November congressional elections. This expectation is similar to one in 1976 that decisions would be made before the presidential elections.

THEY ARE MORE likely now, sources say, because the positions of the two sides have been brought closer together by intensive negotiations and the required compromises are both smaller and more clearly understood.

At the same time, however, the two countries themselves have recently drifted farther apart because of tension over Africa and other subjects.

The pattern in past SALT negotiations has been that the end of a round of meetings by Vance and Gromyko is followed by further technical discussions in Geneva while both sides consider their basic stances.

This could lead to a delay of several months in coming to grips with the political decisions needed for agreement on a treaty and for a meeting to sign it of Carter and the Soviet Communist Party leader, Leonid I. Brezhnev.